BISS Biodiversity Information Science and Standards

Biodiversity Information Science and Standards 3: e37044
doi: 10.3897/biss.3.37044

OPEN ACCESS

Conference Abstract

What 5 Years of Digitisation Teaches Us About What Comes Next

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Received: 10 Jun 2019 | Published: 13 Jun 2019

Citation: Hardy H, Smith V, Livermore L, Allan E, Dupont S, Woodburn M, Vincent S (2019) What 5 Years of Digitisation Teaches Us About What Comes Next. Biodiversity Information Science and Standards 3: e37044. https://doi.org/10.3897/biss.3.37044

Abstract

The Natural History Museum, London (NHM) has now carried out more than five years of digitisation under its Digital Collections Programme (DCP), working with peers from around the world as well as with industrial partners. Data from this and similar programmes are a key input to shared infrastructures and knowledge, for informing research and decision-making for a sustainable future. In keeping with the Biodiversity Next aims of sharing experiences, promoting innovation and inspiring the next leap forward, this presentation will share key lessons learned, including what has gone well and what we will change going into the next phase.

To tackle the challenge of 80 million items, prioritisation is always at the forefront of NHM's approach. Scientific and public value, as well as feasibility, have remained at the core, but we will share how and why our prioritisation methods have evolved over time, managing multiple sources of project ideas to develop a balanced portfolio of mass digitisation, pilot studies and bespoke projects for key specimens that do not lend themselves to a mass approach.

The DCP is not just a set of digitisation projects or workflows – it has always been intended as a business transformation programme, catalysing much wider organisational and cultural changes. In key areas, including data standards and the Museum's data portal,

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DCP has led the way and changes have matured into ‘business as usual’. The Programme and portal teams have been a focus for a much wider span of digitising and databasing activity, involving curators and others, and lead or input to a growing technology portfolio, e.g. influencing collections management systems and data storage. We will discuss our ‘culture is as culture does’ approach to change management.

From an early stage, DCP has sought to work with industrial and commercial partners, benefiting from their expertise and resources. We have also worked continuously to raise additional funds by ‘selling’ the Programme. This comes with considerable challenges, including selecting the right ‘window’ on digitisation for each potential partner or funder; managing internal resource demands e.g. to give tours and respond to partner needs; and finding the right partners for different projects. When it works, however, this can give access to new resources and approaches, pushing digitisation forward.

To make the case for continued investment in the Programme, including the digitiser team, NHM has worked to develop a data-driven approach, consistently measuring the time and cost of digitisation workflows, as well as continuously improving the wider case around the impact of digital collections data, drawing on sources such as citations collated by GBIF. Sometimes that data, and assessment of lessons learned, has led us to stop or change our approach, for example to crowdsourcing transcription. A key challenge going forward remains how to estimate economic value from collections, their data, and the research that uses them, to give us the strongest possible case for the next stages of global efforts to digitise natural history collections.

Keywords

collections, digitisation, digitization, data, digital collections, programme management, project management

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Presented at

Biodiversity_Next 2019